

Good evening County Councilmembers, Council President Glass, and community members in attendance today. My name is Lee Benswanger, and I am an AP government teacher at Seneca Valley High school. I have been a teacher for MCPS for six years. Before this, I worked in sales and finance after a stint in the US army. I am also a product of MCPS and a lifelong resident of Montgomery County.

I am here to speak on behalf of MCEA members to oppose this bill. A rental increase of greater than 8% annually is not sustainable for our diverse community, and the exclusions proposed including but not limited to: units under 15 years old, single-family homes, and individually owned condominiums, would exclude a large percentage of properties, allowing landlords to increase rent by as much as they believe they can get for their property.

Teachers in Montgomery County earn 20% less than similarly credentialed and educated professionals. It is often referred to as the “teaching penalty.” But that does not tell the whole story of how underpaid teachers are in Montgomery County.

In December, educators received the largest pay raise in 10 years. This says more about the inadequacy of the previous raises than about how magnanimous this latest one was. Not only did it not keep up with the cost of living, but it was also significantly below what neighboring counties offer. Since the 2019-2020 school year, all neighboring counties have raised their lowest salaries by at least almost 10%. By comparison, MCPS has only raised the same salaries by less than 3.5%. It is unfathomable that elected officials, in one of the richest counties in the state, have lacked the courage and the spine to take care of the backbone of our education system. And on top of all that, you want landlords to have the ability and legal coverage to raise our rent over 8% every year?

If by 2026, all counties must have the same minimum starting salary, it would be more financially attractive to live and work in a county with a lower cost of living such as Carrol or Frederick Counties (where many MCPS teachers already live). MCPS is fourth in the state for base starting salary despite having the highest cost of living. Allowing for rents across the county to increase by greater than 8% will cause even more strain on our workforce to stay and make it harder to recruit.

Over 6000+ MCEA members live in other counties. Recent studies place Montgomery County as having a cost-of-living index 45% higher than the national average (this is a county-wide average; it may be higher or lower depending on the part of the county where you live.) Living outside of MoCo increases expenses in other areas as it takes longer to get to work (depriving teachers of time with their families), wear and tear on vehicles, and more significant expenses when gas prices increase.

Allow me to put a personal perspective on what this proposal will do. Using my current rent of \$2255 (which is below the county average; some may be higher, some lower) for a 2-bedroom apartment in Germantown and using the industry standard of 3.5 times monthly income for qualification purposes, a resident would need to make \$7,893 a month to qualify. If you're trying to do the math, they need to make \$94,710 per year. My rent this year went up 11% for a two-year renewal. That increased my monthly rent by \$231. I only qualify to live in my current home because I receive a 90% disability payment from the Veteran's Administration. If the current proposal of an 8% increase plus CPI is adopted rent could have gone up by 14.5%. (CPI for 2022 was 6.5%) Therefore, using the proposal before you, if we calculate my rent going up by only 10% annually (the minimum of the 8% and a CPI of only 2%), by 2025 I would need to earn \$127,205 a year. As a teacher with a master's degree and years of experience (and BTW only 28% of county residents have a graduate degree according to recent census data), there is still no placement on the current salary scale or proposed salary scale that would allow a teacher to qualify to live in my apartment without another income from a spouse or a second job. Of course, the current provision in the bill that excludes dwellings less than fifteen years old would allow my property management company to raise my rent as much as they would like. Many of my peers are in similar situations and have had to take on roommates or move out of the county in order to afford to live.

According to the Montgomery County website, more than 30% of MoCo residents spend more than 1/3 of their monthly income on housing (based on gross, not net income). In 2015 almost 50% of renters were "housing burdened." Since the pandemic and the end of rental restrictions, this number has certainly gone up. This proposal will price fellow professionals out of the rental housing market; imagine what it will do to those low-income families who are trying to survive on minimum wage and have more than one job. MCEA teachers are strongly against this proposal for the good of not only our members but the Montgomery County community as a whole.

Teachers care about their students. We chose this career not because of the pay but because of job satisfaction. I have had many jobs/careers in my life, and this is by far the most satisfying. Nothing can match that moment when the lightbulb goes off when a student shows they understand a concept being taught. But it is hard to provide rigorous and substantial instruction when a teacher must worry about their rent payments, where their food is coming from, or if they must work a second (or third) job. This type of stress on teachers is unsustainable and must be addressed with this our new contract. You have the power to fund it. To wait would send a message that the mighty dollar is more important than education. Just putting up signs or sending emails showing how much we value our teachers or throwing pizza parties will not pay our bills, much less our rents. I ask you, "Who has the political will to do what is truly necessary for our communities?" We are united for our kids and our future. Are any of you?